

[By Sam Hemingway, Burlington Free Press](#)

Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., said Thursday the effort to subdue the al-Qaida terrorist threat would be better served if the United States strengthened its relations with Pakistan rather than increasing the number of American troops in neighboring Afghanistan.

Welch, speaking to reporters by phone on the third day of a five-day trip to Pakistan, said Pakistan is more worried about the threat posed by its longtime rival India than by anything else. Defuse that fear, he said, and Pakistan would be more able and willing to help fight the global war on terror.

"If we are able through energetic diplomatic efforts to provide some peace of mind to the Pakistanis that they are not going to be at threat from India, then it is going to create space for the Pakistani army to be much more cooperative with us and with Afghanistan, in respect to the Afghan Taliban," Welch said.

Welch said he's been impressed with the Pakistan army's newfound commitment to rooting out an emerging Taliban-fueled insurgency threat in its own country, and says it is a sign Pakistan could be willing, under the right circumstances, to assist the United States with its goals in the region.

"The Pakistan army that has been on the sidelines is taking up arms against the Taliban threat to its own society," Welch said. "I think it is in a position to be much more cooperative with the United States."

Welch said Pakistani government corruption was a concern, but that Pakistan has a more stable society and respect for laws than Afghanistan and is not looking for military help from the United States to solve its problems.

"Pakistan is a very proud and independent country," Welch said. "They want to solve their own

problems and, frankly, that's the way it's going to have to be."

Welch also said most Pakistanis are not paying close attention to the apparently imminent decision by President Barack Obama on whether to approve a plan by Gen. Stanley McChrystal to increase American troop strength in Afghanistan by 40,000 troops.

"That's not the focus of what they think will make a difference," Welch said.

Welch, a self-described "skeptic" of the proposed military surge, praised Obama for taking his time making the decision, and for demanding that military leaders provide him an "exit plan" for the surge mission once it's over.

Wednesday, Welch visited the northwestern Pakistan city of Peshawar, where a suicide bomber on Sunday blew himself up at a market, killing 12 people. Welch said another bomb in Peshawar on Wednesday killed a Pakistani who worked for the Iranian embassy.

While there, Welch said he and his House colleagues on the trip delivered \$400,000 in medical supplies to the hospital where the people killed and injured in the Sunday bombing were treated. Welch is traveling in Pakistan with three other Democratic members of the House Oversight and Government Reform Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs.

Welch said he also visited a refugee camp where 90,000 people displaced by hostilities in the region were being cared for by humanitarian groups.

Northern Pakistan borders eastern Afghanistan, where nearly 1,500 Vermont Guard soldiers will soon be headed to provide training to Afghan police and army units.

Welch expects to return home Sunday.